CALLED FOR
October 31, 2004

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

PSALM 139:1–12
2 THESSALONIANS 1:1–4, 11–12
LUKE 19:1–10

"We pray that God will make you worthy of his call."
2 Thessalonians 1:11

[Vocation] comes from the Latin *vocare,* to call,
and means the work a person is called to by God.
There are different kinds of voices calling you
to all different kinds of work,
and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God
rather than of Society, say, or Superego, or Self-interest. . . .
The place God calls you to is the place
where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

Frederick Buechner
Wishful Thinking

When I was a child at home and stepped out of line, misbehaved, broke one of the rules—all of which happened fairly frequently—my mother would regularly say something peculiar. She looked me in the eye and said either, "That'll do," which meant "Stop it right now," or "That was uncalled for." I always wondered what exactly that meant. I knew, of course, that part of what it meant was that if the behavior in question did not cease immediately, there would be serious consequences.

Tom Long, who teaches at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, reminded me of all of that in a new book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*. His mother used to say the same thing to him when he misbehaved. He reflects:

> A strange phrase, uncalled for, as if something about being good had to be summoned, as if something about me, the real me, the me I was supposed to be, wasn't just there already formed, but had to be *called for*.

I attended my college reunion last Sunday, and walking around the old campus with some of my oldest friends, I thought about some of the people who called me forth, called for the me that had not yet appeared, most of them gone now, the professor who wrote at the end of my first midterm exam my freshman year—as I was bristling with high school confidence—"Mr. Buchanan: Lincoln said you can fool some of the people all the time, and all the people some of the time, but you can't fool me ever. D minus." I was stunned. It taught me how to study. The coach who was never satisfied that I had given enough because he knew there was more that I had not yet learned how to give. The professor whose compliment encouraged me to take more chances in my writing.

Tom Long reflects,

> When I was born, [my mother] and my father turned to each other and said, "What shall we call this one? Let's call him Thomas." In their naming they were summoning the me that was not yet, summoning in me and from me all their deepest hopes, calling me to come forth. . . . I was just not JUST born; I was called for, and so were you. (p.76)

"Called for," called, an intriguing and important concept.

At the 11:00 a.m. service, we will be installing the Reverend Alice Trowbridge—Ali—to her new position as an Associate Pastor, a position to which she has been "called," to use good Presbyterian language. The *Book of Order*, our constitution, has a lot to say on the subject. The process by which a person becomes a Presbyterian minister begins with something called the Inquirer phase.

When you become an Inquirer, the book says, you "shall demonstrate adequate promise for ministry by presenting a statement of your understanding of Christian vocation in the Reformed Tradition and how it relates to your *sense of call*."

Later, if all goes well, you graduate from Inquirer to Candidate status, and the first hurdle is this question: "Do you believe yourself to be called by God to the ministry of word and sacrament?" That's a very serious question. Most candidates, I suspect, struggle with it. Some can't answer affirmatively. Some do, with their fingers crossed.

When a congregation selects you, as we did Ali, the name we give the invitation, the offer, is "a call." And when you accept, you sit down and talk about the terms of the call; that's the money part. And when it is over, you ask the Presbytery to dissolve the call between the congregation and you.

To be called is, for us, a critical and central matter.

Today is Reformation Sunday, the occasion when we remember Martin Luther, an Augustine monk, nailing his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg and starting the Protestant Reformation. Reformation Sunday used to be the occasion when we sang Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* and listened to the preacher criticize the Catholic church and tell everybody how wonderful it was to be a Protestant. We don't do that anymore, thankfully. In fact, Luther's hymn will be sung in a fair number of Catholic churches this morning, and there is consensus mostly that the Protestant Reformation was a necessity, but that Protestant churches turn out to be no more perfect than the Catholicism from which they came.

Luther's importance is, in part, because of what he had to say about the business of being called. In a fine new biography, Martin Marty describes Luther as a lifelong wrestler with God and struggler with the idea of vocation. His father sent him to university to become a lawyer. But Luther's sometimes tormented philosophic struggles pointed him to theology. On the way back to university after visiting his parents, he was knocked down by lightning and thunder. In terror, he prayed, "Saint Anne, save me; I will become a monk." And he did. Fear did it. He returned to Erfurt, had a big, rowdy party with his friends, and late at night walked with them to the Black Cloister, said a tearful good-bye, aided I assume, by significant steins of German beer, entered the one-way gate—and the rest is history. His father was appalled. He wanted a lawyer, not a penniless monk. He continued to question his son's decision, generally making life miserable for Luther. At Luther's first mass, old Hans was still at it, cornering his son during the celebration afterward and suggesting that maybe it was the devil who knocked him down and sent him to the monastery. Hans pulled out all the stops, even invoking the Fourth Commandment, accusing Luther of not honoring his parents by disobeying their wishes. And so Luther, to his dying day, struggled with his sense of call, his vocation. Was it real? Does God mean for me to do this? Does God have anything to do with it at all?

Garrison Keillor, in a recent book, *Homegrown Democrat* (good reading regardless of how you plan to vote on Tuesday), remembers his formative years in the little Plymouth Brethren Church his family attended: "The basic question in my mind, then and now, is what does God want me to do? I think about it every day. Or I try not to think about it and thus think even harder about it."

Keillor regularly has fun describing the Lutherans of Lake Wobegon, but his notion of doing God's work is particularly Lutheran.

The best thing to come out of Luther's struggle was his notion of the "Priesthood of all Believers." Luther taught that all people have equal standing before God and equal access to God's forgiveness and grace and

love without a priest mediating. All are priests, he said. And out of that came one of the boldest and best ideas of all: namely that all are called by God, that each has a calling, a vocation, that there is no hierarchy in God's kingdom. God needs clergy, but no more than God needs plumbers, bakers, farmers, lawyers, doctors, homemakers. There is work for all to do in God's kingdom, and each person can do God's work as thoroughly and faithfully as the priest at the altar.

Our texts this morning suggest how central this idea is to the Bible. In the beautiful Psalm 139, God is the pursuer, searching, seeking the individual who is actually trying to get away.

> Where can I go from your spirit?
> Or where can I flee from your presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, you are there,
> If I make my life in hell, you are there.

That is a precious and deeply meaningful image of God, God the seeker, God, like Frances Thompson's *Hound of Heaven,* who follows across the labyrinth of the years.

And Zacchaeus, the funny little man, the despised tax collector who climbs a tree to see Jesus—how we all long for the clarity of Zacchaeus' call. Jesus looks up, notices Zacchaeus in the tree, and says with absolute, unmistakable clarity, "Zaccheus, come down; I'm coming to your house today."

Paul originated the idea that God's call is democratic, comes to each and all. God's spirit is given to each for the common good, Paul wrote. Be worthy of the call.

How does it happen? How does God's call come? As a matter of fact, where does our belief in God, our sense that there is a God who cares about what we are doing, come from? What calls that out of us?

An interesting answer was on the cover of *Time* magazine with week: *Is God in Our Genes?* The article was about a new book, *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes.* The author is Dean Hamer, who is a molecular biologist, an agnostic who says that who we are and what we believe is a product of brain chemistry: "We're a bunch of chemical reactions running around in a bag."

But Hamer observes that a lot of people, in fact, are spiritually sensitive, believe in God, or long to believe, spend a lot of time thinking about God. In fact, no subject has been more intriguing to the human intellect than God and God's relationship to us. Hamer thinks he has identified the reason: a

gene, VMAT2. “A single change in that gene seems directly related to the ability to feel self-transcendence.”

I rather prefer St. Augustine on the subject seventeen centuries ago: “Thou has made us restless, until we find our rest in thee.” We long for God, we yearn to do God’s work, because God made us that way.

Someone called it “The Strange Paradox of Salvation.” We, each in our own way, search for God, and at the end, it is not so much that we find God as we sense ourselves somehow found by God.

That’s the Zacchaeus experience. Go climb a tree looking for Jesus and Jesus finds you and calls you down and comes to your house.

Now there is a big secret about this topic, and I’m going to venture revealing it. It has been my experience that laypeople think clergy types have this all figured out, that ministers have an experience, like Luther knocked down by lightning, a voice in the middle of the night, a profoundly emotional experience in which we know, beyond a shadow of doubt, that God wants us to go to seminary—sometimes even picks the seminary for us—and wants us to become a preacher. For some, that is how it happens. The secret is, not for most of us. Most of us struggled with the matter of what to do with our lives as strenuously as everybody else, and our sense of God’s call came in the midst of as much confusion and murkiness and ambiguity as anybody’s vocational decision. Furthermore, the struggle continues. In a book about his first parish in southern Illinois, Duke’s Richard Lischer asks, “Does the work of ministry really have the significance we attach to it? The minister may drive 25 miles to a hospital in order to recite a 30-second prayer and make the sign of the cross over a comatose parishioner. Who sees this act and calls it good?” There is not a minister anywhere who has not asked that question. Sometimes five years out you conclude that no one is watching, it doesn’t really matter, so maybe God doesn’t care so I can find another, better-paying job.

I was privileged to be the preacher for a group of young Presbyterian ministers five years out of seminary last summer. Five years is when we begin to wonder about the validity of our vocation. I read that vignette from Lischer’s book.

I took a chance with those new ministers. I told them I asked that question too—at the same time they are asking it. I gave my testimony. The one who sees the humble act, the one who sees every act of service, integrity, kindness, compassion, justice, whoever we are and whatever we are doing, is the one who created us and claimed us one day in our Baptism, the one who knows our name and all our lives, in countless, mysterious, modest, sometimes utterly mundane tasks and encounters, calls us, calls the person

we were meant to be out of us. I suggested to my young colleagues and I suggest to you that it is not always a good idea to quit every time you are depressed or discouraged, that maybe God calls you to recommit, dig in, have at it again, to find a deeper and better self, summoned, called for, by God.

I have learned this. Clarity comes with time. Looking back over the years, you can see things you were too busy to see at the time. Looking back, simple, small decisions now are clearly major turning points. Looking back, crushing disappointments now look clearly like new opportunity about to present itself; doors closing look like necessary preludes to the next door opening.

I've learned a lot from Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner, who says that he did not so much choose to be a writer as writing chose him. Buechner says that the life of every single one of us is a sacred journey, by the fact that we have had a traveling companion every day, every step of the way. "Listen to your life," Buechner says over and over like a mantra. "In the privacy of your heart take out the album that is your life and search it for the people and places you have loved and learned from, and for those moments in the past—many of them half-forgotten—through which you glimpsed, however dimly or fleetingly, the sacredness of your own journey."

The witness of Christian history and, before that, Jewish history, the testimony of holy scripture, is that the search and longing for God, the wanting to do what God wants us to do, which seems to be a part of the experience of most, if not all of us, is somehow a product of God searching for us, calling us forth, summoning the self we are meant to be.

The witness and testimony is that, like Zacchaeus, when we look for God, when we do something bold and brave and risky—like climbing a tree or going to seminary on the basis of not much more than a hunch or maybe reading the Bible seriously for the first time in our lives or praying intentionally or giving some time and energy to something we believe in or making an extravagantly generous pledge—when we turn our lives toward the good, toward God, God comes to find us, claims us, calls for us.

"Where can I go from your spirit?" the psalmist asked.

"Zacchaeus, come down from that tree," Jesus said.

"Be worthy of your call," St. Peter urged.

Whoever you are, whatever you are doing this morning, there is important work for you to do.

Whoever you are, and whatever you are doing this morning, God has high hopes and expectations for you. God calls you, calls forth the you God intends you to be.

Whoever you are, whatever you are doing this morning, wherever you are on your personal journey, the promise is that God is with you and will be with you always, every step of the way, calling you forth.

Amen.